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PUBLICITY AS A PREVENTIVE OF ABUSES BY THE RETAILER

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All successful business men consider publicity an indispensable feature of their enterprises. In making appropriations for yearly expenditures, a large part of the amount set aside is designed for this purpose. A merchant prince who spends millions of dollars for publicity of one kind or another once said that a business house might as well take down its sign as to discontinue advertising. Such a house might have the best goods obtainable, the most efficient help, the most capable management, but if it did not keep these facts before the public its patronage would be small and it would be doomed to failure.

While the business man has thus been blazing abroad the things he wanted the consumer to know, or believe, the latter has been for the most part dumb. He has had no system of disseminating the facts which as a class he needed to know to safeguard his rights in dealing with the retailer. The knowledge of the individual consumer was not passed on to the others. Consumers are now learning to use the weapon of the business man, publicity, to protect themselves and are finding that it is much more efficient than the so-called strong arm of the law and an indispensable ally of the latter.

In direct proportion to the extent that home industries have been taken out of the home and commercialized has the business of defrauding the unsuspecting housewife flourished. Much of the best thought and energy of our time have been devoted to devising ways and means to fool her and to give just as little value as could be given without exciting her suspicion. This manifestly does not savor of the brotherhood of man and is a sad commentary upon the probity of the dispensers of the necessities of life. Under the circumstances, it was not strange that they should count on being able to fool all the people all the time, and so long as consumers had not learned to protect themselves by advertising these practices,

dishonest dealers became bolder and bolder in their business methods.

From the time of the production of any commodity destined for household use to the moment it reaches the ultimate consumer there are numerous intermediaries all of whom must make a profit, by fair means or foul. We shall here deal only with the retailer, at whose door justly can be laid much responsibility for the high cost of living. Here do we find, among other things, the use of short weights and measures, the weighing of hands, the charging for wooden butter and lard trays and wrapping paper at the prevailing market price of the contents; substitution, misrepresentation, unsanitary handling of food; the selling of cold storage products at the price of fresh, the keeping up of retail prices regardless of reduced wholesale prices, and the giving of prize money to clerks as a reward for selling goods above their actual value.

Year in and year out has the dispenser of the family funds made her daily purchases without knowing of these things, except as isolated cases of fraud were forced upon her attention, whereupon, if she did anything, she would seek some other dealer and submit to the old impositions.

Small things these might have been sometimes, but assumed calculable proportions during the year. In the case of butter, for instance, the short weight of two ounces a day, with butter at thirty cents a pound, means a loss of \$13.50 a year. At times, too, the amount represented is not so little. A New England housewife, after buying a set of scales, found that her butcher had been charging for eighteen pounds of roast beef, when he had delivered only thirteen. The same butcher had been delivering a similar roast to her and charging her for it at the same rate for years. With meat at its present price this assuredly was no trifle. She also found that she had been charged for three hundred pounds of ice a week when her icebox would not hold anything like that amount. Another housewife who had previously left the marketing to her steward found, upon investigation, that she had been spending two or three hundred dollars a month more than was necessary.

Now that the searchlight of publicity has been thrown upon these practices, through the national organization of housewives and other means, the tables have been turned and the trend is toward a square deal for the formerly helpless consumer. Armed with

knowledge she meets the retailer upon an equal footing, as one business man meets another. Familiar with her prerogatives, she insists upon receiving quid pro quo. She knows what she should pay for ice, eggs at different seasons, apples and all farm produce. She has her own scales and checks the dealers' weights. She insists upon clean shops and sanitary handling of food. She demands pure fabrics. She has, in short, cut the ground of her own ignorance from under the dishonest retailers' feet, and the resultant reduction in the family expenses is both surprising and gratifying.

Thus she has not only promoted her own interests and those of her family but those of the trade as well. There are many honest dealers and dealers who wish to be honest; but so long as the public did not know or care whether or not it was cheated, unfair competition tended to force the naturally honest to adopt the practices of the less scrupulous. Some, indeed, have maintained high standards in the face of extremely discouraging circumstances, and when housewives are sufficiently enlightened to place a premium upon honesty their kind will multiply, while those who cannot adapt themselves to the new conditions must be forced out of business. The well-informed consumer and the dishonest retailer are not co-existent.